

Biography of john donne

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Biography of John Donne John Donne was an English poet, satirist, lawyer and priest. He is considered the pre-eminent representative of the metaphysical poets. His works are noted for their strong, sensual style and include sonnets, love poetry, religious poems, Latin translations, epigrams, elegies, songs, satires and sermons. His poetry is noted for its vibrancy of language and inventiveness of metaphor, especially compared to that of his contemporaries. Donne's style is characterised by abrupt openings and various paradoxes, ironies and dislocations. These features, along with his frequent dramatic or everyday speech rhythms, his tense syntax and his tough eloquence, were both a reaction against the smoothness of conventional Elizabethan poetry and an adaptation into English of European baroque and mannerist techniques. His early career was marked by poetry that bore immense knowledge of British society and he met that knowledge with sharp criticism. Another important theme in Donne's poetry is the idea of true religion, something that he spent much time considering and theorising about. He wrote secular poems as well as erotic and love poems. He is particularly famous for his mastery of metaphysical conceits. Despite his great education and poetic talents, Donne lived in poverty for several years, relying heavily on wealthy friends. He spent much of the money he inherited during and after his education on womanising, literature, pastimes, and travel. In 1601, Donne secretly married Anne Moore, with whom he had twelve children. In 1615, he became an Anglican priest, although he did not want to take Anglican orders. He did so because King James I persistently ordered it. In 1621, he was appointed the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London. He also served as a member of parliament in 1601 and in 1614.

Biography Early Life Donne was born in London, into a Roman Catholic family when practice of that religion was illegal in England. Donne was the third of six children. His father, also named John Donne, was of Welsh descent and a warden of the Ironmongers Company in the City of London. Donne's father was a respected Roman Catholic who avoided unwelcome government attention out of fear of persecution. Donne's father died in 1576, leaving his wife, Elizabeth Heywood, the responsibility of raising their children. Elizabeth was also from a recusant Roman Catholic family, the daughter of John Heywood, the playwright, and sister of the Reverend Jasper Heywood, a Jesuit priest and translator. She was a great-niece of the Roman Catholic martyr Thomas More. This tradition of martyrdom would continue among Donne's closer relatives, many of whom were executed or exiled for religious reasons. Donne was educated privately; however, there is no evidence to support the popular claim that he was taught by Jesuits. Donne's mother married Dr. John Syminges, a wealthy widower with three children, a few months after Donne's father died. Two more of his sisters, Mary and Katherine, died in 1581. Donne's mother, who had lived in the Deanery after Donne became Dean of St. Paul's, survived him, dying in 1632. Donne was a student at Hart Hall, now Hertford College, Oxford, from the age of 11. After three years at Oxford he was admitted to the University of Cambridge, where he studied for another three years. He was unable to obtain a degree from either institution because of his Catholicism, since he could not take the Oath of Supremacy required of graduates. In 1591 he was accepted as a student at the Thavies Inn legal school, one of the Inns of Chancery in London. On 6 May 1592 he was admitted to Lincoln's Inn, one of the Inns of

Court. His brother Henry was also a university student prior to his arrest in 1593 for harbouring a Catholic priest, William Harrington, whom Henry betrayed under torture. Harrington was tortured on the rack, hanged until not quite dead, then was subjected to disembowelment. Henry Donne died in Newgate prison of bubonic plague, leading John Donne to begin questioning his Catholic faith. During and after his education, Donne spent much of his considerable inheritance on women, literature, pastimes and travel. Although there is no record detailing precisely where he travelled, it is known that he travelled across Europe and later fought with the Earl of Essex and Sir Walter Raleigh against the Spanish at Cadiz (1596) and the Azores (1597) and witnessed the loss of the Spanish flagship, the San Felipe. According to Izaak Walton, who wrote a biography of Donne in 1658: ... he returned not back into England till he had stayed some years, first in Italy, and then in Spain, where he made many useful observations of those countries, their laws and manner of government, and returned perfect in their languages. -Izaak Walton By the age of 25 he was well prepared for the diplomatic career he appeared to be seeking. He was appointed chief secretary to the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, Sir Thomas Egerton, and was established at Egerton's London home, York House, Strand close to the Palace of Whitehall, then the most influential social centre in England. Marriage to Anne More During the next four years, he fell in love with Egerton's niece Anne More. They were married just before Christmas in 1601, against the wishes of both Egerton and George More, who was Lieutenant of the Tower and Anne's father. This wedding ruined Donne's career and earned him a short stay in Fleet Prison, along with Samuel Brooke, who married them, and the man who acted as a

witness to the wedding. Donne was released when the marriage was proven valid, and he soon secured the release of the other two. Walton tells us that when Donne wrote to his wife to tell her about losing his post, he wrote after his name: John Donne, Anne Donne, Un-done. It was not until 1609 that Donne was reconciled with his father-in-law and received his wife's dowry. After his release, Donne had to accept a retired country life in Pyrford, Surrey. Over the next few years, he scraped a meagre living as a lawyer, depending on his wife's cousin Sir Francis Wolly to house him, his wife, and their children. Because Anne Donne bore a new baby almost every year, this was a very generous gesture. Though he practised law and may have worked as an assistant pamphleteer to Thomas Morton, Donne was in a constant state of financial insecurity, with a growing family to provide for. Anne bore twelve children in sixteen years of marriage (including two stillbirths—their eighth and then, in 1617, their last child); indeed, she spent most of her married life either pregnant or nursing. The ten surviving children were Constance, John, George, Francis, Lucy (named after Donne's patroness Lucy, Countess of Bedford, her godmother), Bridget, Mary, Nicholas, Margaret, and Elizabeth. Francis, Nicholas, and Mary died before they were ten. In a state of despair, Donne noted that the death of a child would mean one less mouth to feed, but he could not afford the burial expenses. During this time, Donne wrote, but did not publish, *Biathanatos*, his defence of suicide. His wife died on 15 August 1617, five days after giving birth to their twelfth child, a still-born baby. Donne mourned her deeply, and wrote of his love and loss in his 17th Holy Sonnet. Career and Later Life Donne was elected as Member of Parliament for the constituency of Brackley in 1602,

but this was not a paid position. The fashion for coterie poetry of the period gave him a means to seek patronage and many of his poems were written for wealthy friends or patrons, especially Sir Robert Drury, who came to be Donne's chief patron in 1610. Donne wrote the two Anniversaries, *An Anatomy of the World* (1611) and *Of the Progress of the Soul*, (1612), for Drury. In 1610 and 1611 he wrote two anti-Catholic polemics: *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Ignatius his Conclave*. Although James was pleased with Donne's work, he refused to reinstate him at court and instead urged him to take holy orders. At length, Donne acceded to the King's wishes and in 1615 was ordained into the Church of England. Donne was awarded an honorary doctorate in divinity from Cambridge in 1615 and became a Royal Chaplain in the same year, and was made a Reader of Divinity at Lincoln's Inn in 1616. In 1618 he became chaplain to Viscount Doncaster, who was on an embassy to the princes of Germany. Donne did not return to England until 1620. In 1621 Donne was made Dean of St Paul's, a leading (and well-paid) position in the Church of England and one he held until his death in 1631. During his period as Dean his daughter Lucy died, aged eighteen. In late November and early December 1623 he suffered a nearly fatal illness, thought to be either typhus or a combination of a cold followed by a period of fever. During his convalescence he wrote a series of meditations and prayers on health, pain, and sickness that were published as a book in 1624 under the title of *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. One of these meditations, Meditation XVII, later became well known for its phrase "for whom the bell tolls" and the statement that "no man is an island". In 1624 he became vicar of St Dunstan-in-the-West, and 1625 a prolocutor to Charles I. He earned a

reputation as an eloquent preacher and 160 of his sermons have survived, including the famous Death's Duel sermon delivered at the Palace of Whitehall before King Charles I in February 1631. Death It is thought that his final illness was stomach cancer, although this has not been proven. He died on 31 March 1631 having written many poems, most only in manuscript. Donne was buried in old St Paul's Cathedral, where a memorial statue of him was erected (carved from a drawing of him in his shroud), with a Latin epigraph probably composed by himself. Donne's monument survived the 1666 fire, and is on display in the present building. Writings Early Poetry Donne's earliest poems showed a developed knowledge of English society coupled with sharp criticism of its problems. His satires dealt with common Elizabethan topics, such as corruption in the legal system, mediocre poets, and pompous courtiers. His images of sickness, vomit, manure, and plague reflected his strongly satiric view of a world populated by all the fools and knaves of England. His third satire, however, deals with the problem of true religion, a matter of great importance to Donne. He argued that it was better to examine carefully one's religious convictions than blindly to follow any established tradition, for none would be saved at the Final Judgment, by claiming "A Harry, or a Martin taught [them] this." Donne's early career was also notable for his erotic poetry, especially his elegies, in which he employed unconventional metaphors, such as a flea biting two lovers being compared to sex. In Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed, he poetically undressed his mistress and compared the act of fondling to the exploration of America. In Elegy XVIII, he compared the gap between his lover's breasts to the Hellespont. Donne did not publish these poems, although did allow

them to circulate widely in manuscript form. "... any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.. " - Donne, Meditation XVII

Some have speculated that Donne's numerous illnesses, financial strain, and the deaths of his friends all contributed to the development of a more somber and pious tone in his later poems. The change can be clearly seen in "An Anatomy of the World" (1611), a poem that Donne wrote in memory of Elizabeth Drury, daughter of his patron, Sir Robert Drury of Hawstead, Suffolk. This poem treats Elizabeth's demise with extreme gloominess, using it as a symbol for the Fall of Man and the destruction of the universe. The poem "A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day, Being the Shortest Day", concerns the poet's despair at the death of a loved one. In it Donne expresses a feeling of utter negation and hopelessness, saying that "I am every dead thing... re-begot / Of absence, darkness, death." This famous work was probably written in 1627 when both Donne's friend Lucy, Countess of Bedford, and his daughter Lucy Donne died. Three years later, in 1630, Donne wrote his will on Saint Lucy's day (13 December), the date the poem describes as "Both the year's, and the day's deep midnight." The increasing gloominess of Donne's tone may also be observed in the religious works that he began writing during the same period. His early belief in the value of scepticism now gave way to a firm faith in the traditional teachings of the Bible. Having converted to the Anglican Church, Donne focused his literary career on religious literature. He quickly became noted for his sermons and religious poems. The lines of these sermons would come to influence future works of English literature, such as Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell*

Tolls, which took its title from a passage in Meditation XVII of Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, and Thomas Merton's No Man is an Island, which took its title from the same source. Towards the end of his life Donne wrote works that challenged death, and the fear that it inspired in many men, on the grounds of his belief that those who die are sent to Heaven to live eternally. One example of this challenge is his Holy Sonnet X, Death Be Not Proud, from which come the famous lines "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so." Even as he lay dying during Lent in 1631, he rose from his sickbed and delivered the Death's Duel sermon, which was later described as his own funeral sermon. Death's Duel portrays life as a steady descent to suffering and death, yet sees hope in salvation and immortality through an embrace of God, Christ and the Resurrection. Style His work has received much criticism over the years, especially concerning his metaphysical form. Donne is generally considered the most prominent member of the Metaphysical poets, a phrase coined in 1781 by the critic Dr Johnson, following a comment on Donne by the poet John Dryden. Dryden had written of Donne in 1693: "He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love." In Life of Cowley (from Samuel Johnson's 1781 work of biography and criticism Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets), Johnson refers to the beginning of the seventeenth century in which there "appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets". Donne's immediate successors in poetry therefore

tended to regard his works with ambivalence, with the Neoclassical poets regarding his conceits as abuse of the metaphor. However he was revived by Romantic poets such as Coleridge and Browning, though his more recent revival in the early twentieth century by poets such as T. S. Eliot and critics like F. R. Leavis tended to portray him, with approval, as an anti-Romantic. Donne's work suggests a healthy appetite for life and its pleasures, while also expressing deep emotion. He did this through the use of conceits, wit and intellect—as seen in the poems "The Sun Rising" and "Batter My Heart". Donne is considered a master of the metaphysical conceit, an extended metaphor that combines two vastly different ideas into a single idea, often using imagery. An example of this is his equation of lovers with saints in "The Canonization". Unlike the conceits found in other Elizabethan poetry, most notably Petrarchan conceits, which formed clichéd comparisons between more closely related objects (such as a rose and love), metaphysical conceits go to a greater depth in comparing two completely unlike objects. One of the most famous of Donne's conceits is found in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" where he compares two lovers who are separated to the two legs of a compass. Donne's works are also witty, employing paradoxes, puns, and subtle yet remarkable analogies. His pieces are often ironic and cynical, especially regarding love and human motives. Common subjects of Donne's poems are love (especially in his early life), death (especially after his wife's death), and religion. John Donne's poetry represented a shift from classical forms to more personal poetry. Donne is noted for his poetic metre, which was structured with changing and jagged rhythms that closely resemble casual speech (it was for this that the more

classical-minded Ben Jonson commented that "Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging"). Some scholars believe that Donne's literary works reflect the changing trends of his life, with love poetry and satires from his youth and religious sermons during his later years. Other scholars, such as Helen Gardner, question the validity of this dating—most of his poems were published posthumously (1633). The exception to these is his *Anniversaries* which were published in 1612 and *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* published in 1624. His sermons are also dated, sometimes specifically by date and year. Legacy Donne is commemorated as a priest in the calendar of the Church of England and in the Calendar of Saints of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on 31 March. Sylvia Plath, interviewed on BBC Radio in late 1962, said the following about a book review of her collection of poems titled *The Colossus* that had been published in the United Kingdom two years earlier: "I remember being appalled when someone criticised me for beginning just like John Donne but not quite managing to finish like John Donne, and I felt the weight of English literature on me at that point." The memorial to Donne, modelled after the engraving pictured above, was one of the few such memorials to survive the Great Fire of London in 1666 and now appears in St Paul's Cathedral where Donne is buried. Donne in Literature In Margaret Edson's Pulitzer prize-winning play *Wit* (1999), the main character, a professor of 17th century poetry specialising in Donne, is dying of cancer. The play was adapted for the HBO film *Wit* starring Emma Thompson. Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* feature in *The Calligrapher* (2003), a novel by Edward Docx. In the 2006 novel *The Meaning of Night* by Michael Cox, Donne's works are frequently

quoted. Donne appears, along with his wife Anne and daughter Pegge, in the award-winning novel *Conceit* (2007) by Mary Novik. Joseph Brodsky has a poem called "Elegy for John Donne". The love story of Donne and Anne More is the subject of Maeve Haran's 2010 historical novel *The Lady and the Poet*. An excerpt from "Meditation 17 Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions" serves as the opening for Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer prize-winning novel *Gilead* makes several references to Donne's work. Donne is the favourite poet of Dorothy Sayers' fictional detective Lord Peter Wimsey, and the Wimsey books include numerous quotations from, and allusions to, his work. Donne's poem 'A Fever' (incorrectly called 'The Fever') is mentioned in the penultimate paragraph of the novel "The Silence of the Lambs" by Thomas Harris. Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran writes a paper on Donne in Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History*, in which he ties together Donne and Izaak Walton with help of an imaginary philosophy called "Metahemeralism". Donne plays a significant role in Christie Dickason's *The Noble Assassin* (2011), a novel based on the life of Donne's patron and putative lover, Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford. Donne in Popular Culture John Renbourn, on his 1966 debut album *John Renbourn*, sings a version of the poem, "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star". (He alters the last line to "False, ere I count one, two, three.") Tarwater, in their album *Salon des Refusés*, have put "The Relic" to song. The plot of Neil Gaiman's novel *Stardust* is based upon the poem "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star," with the fallen star turned into a major character. Bob Chilcott has arranged a choral piece to Donne's "Go and Catch a Falling Star". Van Morrison pays tribute to the poet on "Rave On

John Donne" and makes references in many other songs. Lost in Austen, the British mini series based on Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, has Bingley refer to Donne when he describes taking Jane to America, " John Donne, don't you know? 'License my roving hands,' and so forth." Las